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ABSTRACT

This report discusses the outcomes of a project that examined the social and contextual factors that underpin the identification of elementary students as having learning disabilities. Data were collected in a primary education classroom in Queensland, Australia. Initially the teacher was interviewed on teaching practices, the literacy curriculum, and the students in her class. Videotapes of literacy lessons were taken regularly throughout the year. Additionally, the teacher was interviewed while watching a videotaped lesson to explain the reasons for her practices and her interpretations of students' behavior. Analyses explored the ways in which classroom practice structured who was identified as having learning disabilities and why this decision was made. Pedagogical practices affected what and how students learned about literacy and shaped teacher opportunities to observe student understanding about literacy. Question-answer sequences were one of the primary sources of information the teacher had about students' literacy knowledge. The other source of information was a seatwork activity which followed the dialogue segment of the lesson. The components of the lesson were the main basis on which the teacher made judgments about who had learning disabilities, indicating the fundamental role pedagogy played in learning disabilities identification. (Contains 19 references.) (CR)

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Pedagogy, Observation and the Construction of Learning Disabilities

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Abstract

In recent years there has been a growing awareness of the ways in which disabilities are socially constructed. This project examined the social and contextual factors that underpin the identification of students as having learning disabilities. Data were collected in a classroom in Queensland, Australia. Initially the teacher was interviewed on the nature of her classroom, teaching practices, the literacy curriculum and the students in her class. Videotapes of literacy lessons were taken regularly throughout the year. Additionally, the teacher was interviewed while watching a videotaped lesson to explain the reasons for her practices and her interpretations of students' behaviour. Analyses explored the ways in which classroom practice structured who is identified as having learning disabilities and why this decision is made. Pedagogy was informed by a number of factors. In particular, decisions about curriculum in the classroom was influenced by school-based curriculum committees which mandated specific literacy content that was to be covered by all grades in the school. These mandates exerted a set of powerful constraints on how teachers structured their pedagogy in classrooms.

Pedagogical practices impacted on what and how students learned about literacy. Pedagogy also shaped teacher opportunities to observe student understanding about literacy. These opportunities to observe student understanding were critical in the identification of learning disabilities. For example, in the school we observed, the curriculum committee required that all classes cover content related genre of text. In many cases the cognitive requirements of this task were too complex for the very young children we observed. Further, the teacher predominantly utilised a question-answer form of pedagogy which often became a "guessing-game" in which the students' task was to guess what the teacher had in mind. It appeared that students who were most proficient at reading subtle nonverbal teacher cues were most successful at answering these questions and students who could not read teacher cues had difficulty. Question-answer sequences were one of the primary sources of information the teacher had about students' literacy knowledge. The other source of information was a seatwork activity which followed the dialogue segment of the lesson. This activity primarily consisted of cutting and pasting or writing small sections of text. We suggest that these components of the lesson were main basis on which the teacher made judgements about who had learning disabilities. As such the nature of the pedagogy played a fundamental role in defining who was considered competent and who was identified as having learning disabilities.

Pedagogy, Observation and the Construction of Learning Disabilities

Introduction

Traditionally, children who experience school failure requiring the support of a resource teacher have been identified as having a *learning disability*. The term was introduced by Kirk, who defined it as "retardation, disorder or delayed development in one or more of the processes of speech, language, reading, writing, arithmetic, or other school subjects resulting from a psychological handicap caused by possibly cerebral dysfunction. It is not the result of mental retardation, sensory deprivation, or cultural or instructional factors" (Kirk, 1962). The definition established that learning disability exists as a within-child disorder arising from neurological or psychological-process impairments. A variety of psychophysiological variables have been used to indicate brain pathology for learning disabled students. These have included inadequacies in motor development (Kepart, 1960), visual and auditory perception (Frostig, 1972; Wepman, 1958), psycholinguistic ability (Kirk & Kirk, 1971) and memory and information processing skills (Connor, 1983).

The internal-deficit orientation of learning disabilities continues to be reflected in current definitions so that the field of learning disabilities has been dominated by psychological perspectives and current practices are grounded in the assumption that failure is due to a real, physical entity which exists inside the heads of children and that requires accurate identification and treatment for remediation. Thus, systemic procedures are designed to seek out and classify the learning disability and to respond to it appropriately. These processes include assessment, individualised planning, and the provision of 'special' education.

Critical social research on learning disabilities demonstrates that the identification of students with learning disabilities does not necessarily function in the way that was intended. Carrier (1990,21) suggests that the assessment process is fundamentally social in nature, involving a "panoply of unspoken assumptions, covert cues and responses". Individualised educational planning meetings frequently do not function to ensure appropriate educational provision for the child. Rather, they are intensely political. So that Reynolds (1984) refers to the educational team decision meeting as a "capitulation conference", where parents and often teachers capitulate to the authority of the psychologist.

A central issue which has emerged from social critiques of the field is the question of whose interests are served by categories such as learning disability. Traditional perspectives assume that these categories work in the interests of the child. However, social analysis suggests that they may often serve the interests of professionals (Tomlinson, 1982). Thus, a small number of researchers have argued that in practice, the apparent neutrality of the processes of identification, assessment,

educational planning and provision is an illusion. In other words, the procedural safeguards designed to ameliorate the condition, in fact, provide a formal mechanism for the creation of learning disability through social processes (McDermott, 1993).

Despite these critiques, the actual practices of identifying, assessing and treating learning disabilities have held fast to psychological perspectives based on the rhetoric of "in the best interests of the child" and the professional field has been extremely resistant to social analysis. Thus, Dudley-Marling and Dippo (1995) argue that, while the field of learning disabilities has enriched itself by drawing on diverse traditions in medicine and psychology, it has remained isolated from developments in social and critical theory.

Purely psychological approaches have been unable to explain the educational practices related to learning disabilities largely because the creation and treatment of learning disabilities are forms of social practice (Christensen, Gerber & Everhart, 1986). McDermott (1993, 272) has argued that "there is no such thing as LD, only a social practice of displaying, noticing, documenting, remediating and explaining it". In other words, the processes by which a child is transformed from 'normal' to 'learning disabled' are fundamentally social rather than psychological in nature. The social processes by which this transformation occurs are situated in the day-to-day lives and interactions of teachers and students, specialists and administrators. They are "submerged in the routine of teachers' work and thoughts (so that) frequently there is no call for teachers to articulate them" (Carrier, 1990, p.211). It is interesting to note that these unrecognised social processes - the activities which McDermott has listed (ie displaying, noticing and recognizing) are expressed as participles and stand in stark contrast to the formal, institutional processes of identification, referral and psychological assessment - which are expressed as nouns without agents enacting them.

This is not to suggest that school failure does not exist or to deny that some children find learning much more difficult than others. However, it is argued that institutional responses to failure are shaped by social as well as psychological factors and that a coherent understanding of school failure cannot be obtained without an analysis of how these social processes work.

Relatively few researchers have systematically investigated the continuum of the social processes underpinning learning disability. Little is known how these categories emerge from the day-to-day lives of teachers and students in classrooms. However, those researchers who have examined this issue have provided some interesting insights into how classroom discourse functions to designate some students as having a 'disability' while others are seem as performing satisfactorily.

Hargreaves, Hester, and Mellor (1975) argue that identification and referral of pupils can only be understood within the context of ongoing classroom interaction. For example, they found that being identified as a disruptive student was not an issue of the level of noise a student creates.

Rather, it depended on how skilled the student was in negotiating the classroom social organisation - not being caught making noise at times prohibited by the teacher.

Similarly, Hull, Rose, Fraser & Castellano (1991) demonstrated the way in which a 'remedial' student could be identified because of her frequent violations of classroom discourse rules. Classroom discourse was dominated by initiation, reply, evaluation (IRE) sequences. The teacher would initiate a student comment, the student would reply and the teacher would evaluate the comment. For example:

> Teacher: How about some of the rest of you? (initiation)
> Student: I, I just seen *Like a Prayer*. (reply)
> Teacher: Okay, *Like a Prayer*, all right, good. (p. 302).

Hull et al., argue that the rules for IRE sequences were quite clear, and that it was inappropriate for any student to interrupt the sequence, unless invited to speak by the teacher. However, Maria, the remedial student, did not abide by this structure. She persistently interrupted the sequence. While Maria's interruptions were not necessarily disruptive of the flow of the lesson, they were intrusive and inappropriate. Even thought the teacher indicated that Maria's written work was good, at times showing logical thought and organisation, she continued to evaluate Maria's academic skills based on her inappropriate verbal behaviour. In an interview the teacher commented:

> Maria is becoming to me the Queen of the Non Sequiturs. You know, she really is just not quite... That's, that's why I'm sort of amazed at times at, at her writing level, which is really not really not too bad... Because her thinking level seems to be so scattered that I would expect that her writing be a lot more disorganized and disjointed. (p. 310).

Hull et al. argued that "Maria's interactional patterns in class were not just an annoying conversational style. Her bothersome conversational habits became evidence of a thinking problem – evidence so salient that it goes unqualified even in the face of counter evidence" (p. 311).

In his case study of "Adam," McDermott (1993) found that learning disability was less an inadequacy inside Adam's head and more a consequence of "the arbitrariness of the tasks Adam is asked to work on ... and the interactional dilemmas thrown in Adam's way as he moves through school" (p.279). According to traditional psychometric criteria Adam qualified as learning disabled, however McDermott found that in everyday life situations, Adam's "disability" disappeared. "He proved in every way competent, and, more than most of the children he could be wonderfully charming, particularly if there was a good story to tell" (p.278). In classroom tasks with low cognitive

demand Adam performed capably, provided that he had a supportive social environment. For example, when working with a supportive peer, he could complete tasks successfully, sometimes reading instructions independently. However, if the interpersonal environment became more hostile, Adam's performance deteriorated dramatically. Rather than completing the task, Adam concentrated on avoiding the appearance of incompetence.

Unfortunately, use of an incompetence-avoidance strategy merely compounded the problem. For example, Adam made every effort to avoid reading instructions in situations where others might observe any errors. Thus, mistakes became inevitable. As McDermott notes, "reading 'teaspoon' for 'tablespoon' becomes more likely, not because Adam's head does not work, but because he barely looks at the page and ordinary resources for solution of the problem are disallowed" (p.285).

Central to this cycle of avoidance and failure was public humiliation based on exposure of the learning disability. McDermott referred to this humiliation as a *"degradation ceremony."* Adam consistently acted in ways to avoid such exposure. However, McDermott argues that once Adam's learning disability had been identified and named it became a visible element of the classroom discourse. "Adam's LD generally played to a packed house. Everyone knew how to look for, recognise, stimulate, make visible and depending upon the circumstances, keep quiet about or expose Adam's problem" (p.287). Thus, "looking for Adam's LD has become something of a sport in Adam's class" (p.291). His difficulties lay not so much in the inherent difficulty of material he was required to learn or his own inherent inability to deal with that material but in the social organisation and patterns of interaction within the classroom. Adam's difficulty arose because he "cannot address the material without worrying whether he can get it straight or whether anyone will notice if he does not" (p.291).

Thus, existing evidence indicates that the social processes in the classroom exert a powerful influence on who is perceived to evidence imperfect learning and is labeled as having learning disabilities. The study reported in this paper focussed on teachers' pedagogical practices in literacy lessons as they impacted the identification of children experiencing learning disabilities. In particular, we expand on the activity of "noticing" by teachers.

Data Collection

The data reported in this paper represents of a portion the data collected in a larger study which aimed to explore the social context and classroom practices involved in the identification, and treatment of students with learning disabilities. The data used in this paper were collected in a Grade 2 classroom in Queensland (Australia). Grade 1 is the first year of schooling in the Queensland. Therefore, the children were in the second year of schooling, equivalent to Grade 1 in the United States. The term learning disabilities is used to refer to children who are experiencing problems in

acquiring basic academic competencies to the extent that they require support beyond that provided by the classroom teacher. In Australia the term *learning difficulties* is generally used rather than the term learning disabilities. However, the more universally recognised term – learning disabilities is used here.

Initially the teacher (H. S.) was interviewed to obtain information on the curriculum and teaching strategies she used in the classroom. She was also asked to describe the students in the class. Literacy lessons were videotaped approximately every four weeks over a period of six months. Following the penultimate video taped lesson, the teacher was interviewed after viewing segments of the videoed lesson. She was asked to explain her purposes in teaching the particular content and utilizing particular pedagogy, and her understanding of student behaviour during the lesson.

Analysis of Literacy Lessons

Following examination of all the videoed lessons, we developed a theoretical framework to indicate the relationships between the multiplicity of factors which seemed to shape classroom pedagogy and the identification of children as having learning disabilities. These factors are portrayed in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Although the factors are represented in boxes we do not see them as discrete phenomena. Rather, they should be thought of as overlapping elements that each play a role in the construction of classroom experiences for teachers and students. While we have used arrows to indicate directions, we mean to describe flows of discourses and practices. In this paper, our interests are mainly in domains A, B and C.

Impact of Curriculum Development Process

Fundamental to the classroom practices in the school appeared to be the curriculum development process. School-based curriculum development is strongly encouraged by government policy. In the school we studied, literacy curriculum was set by a school committee that consisted of 'upper-school' teachers. The upper-school refers to Grades 5-7. Thus, in developing the curriculum the committee appeared to be more familiar with and more sensitive to the literacy needs of upper-elementary students than very young students. The committee strongly endorsed an interdisciplinary or integrated-curriculum approach and required that the entire school work as a cohesive whole by teaching the same underlying concept or theme at the same time across all the grades in the school. Thus, the whole school studied the same genre (eg fiction) or theme (eg dinosaurs) simultaneously.

This practice was strongly supported by the principal. However, it imposed constraints on teachers and was not supported by the teacher we worked with:

H. S.: I don't like how we are all supposed to teach the same. Everything the same.

Interviewer: Because you've got different ability kids?

H. S.: Yes. Last year we were streamed and we used to get away with a few things. Now he (the principal) wants everyone to teach the same things at the same time, which is impossible, resourcewise. And they are still different kids. They may be mixed-ability (classes) but they're different. Debbie's (another grade 2 teacher) got the opposite (kinds of children) to me. And her planning should be different. But no, we have to team teach, we have to teach the same thing.

Conceptual Confusion and Enactment of Curriculum

In addition to constraining classroom practice, the policy appeared to have a number of unintended consequences for students. For example, it appeared that the very young children we observed were often confronted with literacy tasks that were conceptually very difficult for them to manage. At times even the teacher seemed to be unequal to the demands of the task and appeared conceptually confused. For example, one lesson focussed on a book about an Australian native animal called an echidna. This extract below also demonstrated the implementation a theme (native animals) and the use of an integrated-curriculum approach which was mandated by the school curriculum committee.

The lesson begins with a discussion on the characteristics of echidnas:

H. S. Echidna. ... and it's one of our special animals, because this echidna lays eggs and also looks after it's babies. A lot of animals that lay eggs don't look after their babies, they just leave them. Birds do, snakes and turtles don't often, OK? Frogs hardly ever. Alright? So we're going to have a look at this book... (Teacher opens book and holds it up for students to see). Here we have a picture of the echidna. We've got them around....(Teacher read text) It's a slow moving, and usually harmless (Teacher closes book). What does it do when it gets into trouble? Sam?

The lesson continued indicating that echidnas rolled up into balls when threatened, had spines, ate ants, dug fast, laid eggs, were mammals, fed their young milk and were warm blooded. H. S. explained what was meant by warm-blooded. The lesson then abruptly shifted direction to focus on the main literacy-related content of the lesson, the genre of the text:

H. S. OK we'll read a little bit about the echidna. Is this book, do you think, will this be a narrative book or a fiction book?

Shaun: Fiction.

H. S. Non-fiction, sorry I'll get you all confused. OK why do we know this might be something that's going to tell us facts?

Shaun: That it's not true?

S. H: Do you think it's a not true book, a narrative? Or a true book - tells the facts and non-fiction.

Mark & Tom: True

H. S. OK Hands up those who think it's a true book, it's a non-fiction book. (Tom, Mark, Sam, Andrew, Barbara, Pat, Matt raise hands) Hands down. Hands up those who think it's a narrative, and it's going to tell us a story, (John raises his hand). OK so why do you think, the people who think it's a true book. Why do you think it's going to be a true book? It's going to tell us the .... facts. (Sam puts up his hand and the teacher nods to him).

Sam: Because it might come true.

(H. S. looks at Mark).

Mark: ummm, because they made it ummmm real, made it real.

H. S. Well what about the cover. What makes you think that this is going to be a true story? Tom?

Tom: ( )

H. S. True. We'll have a look. Well the animal looks real, it's not wearing any clothes, it's not wearing glasses. OK now what happens in our narrative stories, like Possum Magic.

Tom: If they did wear glasses they would be funny.

H. S. Very funny.

Mark: Yeah. If we saw a real one with glasses, that would be real....

H. S. We've got a table of contents which shows us....

Who thinks it's a non-fiction book? It's a real book. Who thinks it's going to tell us the truth now? (most students raise their hands). Tell us what we know about these animals at that time? Andrew you still think it's a narrative book – it's going to tell us a story? Why?

Andrew: ( )

H. S. Who else thinks it's a narrative? Shaun do you think it's a narrative, it's going to tell us a story?

Shaun: Umm, yes.

H. S. Well let's read a little bit of it. We'll go over to our page. Look, see how it's set out. Tells us where abouts in Australia these are found, the map of Australia and the dark bits. It tells us the length, where it lives, it's habitat, OK? And then it tells us something about it, it gives us a description and tells us it's scientific name. Is that a story?

Student Chorus: No.

H. S. No! That's a report. It tells us about something....You've got a short beaked echidna. Echidnas live everywhere – look at it, all blue. It lives almost everywhere from forest to desert. And it's going to tell us about it. It's going to tell us the truth, which is a non-fiction book. If it says 'one day an echidna went to visit America and on the way they had some Pavlova' , would that be true or false?

Mark: False.

H. S. Would it be a story, a narrative or a fiction – non-fiction – you are getting me confused.

In teaching genre theory, the concepts of truth, non-fiction, facts, real, report, false, story, fiction, and narrative, seem to be intertwined and appeared at times to become confused. It seemed that H. S. was suggesting that there were two fundamental types of text, and that each could have multiple labels. One was true, non-fiction, real, a report and contained facts. The other was a narrative, fiction, a story and false. The confusion was compounded when terms such as 'true story' and 'real book' were introduced into the discussion.

Structure of Lessons and Role of Reading

This dialogue was typical of the lessons we observed. Lessons were usually divided into two segments. They began with the children seated together on the floor. Initially the teacher conducted a dialogue, Similar to that reported above . Then the children moved to their desks to complete an activity. The activity usually involved cutting and pasting a worksheet and usually occupied the majority of the time allocated to literacy.

During the initial phase of the lesson, the teacher appeared to try to develop concepts and ideas though questioning the children. She only rarely provided specific direct instruction. These sessions also seemed to be characterised by talking about the activity of reading rather than engagement in reading. In the six lessons we videotaped, we never observed children reading individually for an extended period. Occasionally there was whole-class choral reading of words or phrases or a single child would be asked to read a word or a sentence displayed to the class at the

front of the room. Thus, from the lessons we observed we were unable to make informed judgements about the children's competence in reading and writing.

In interview, H. S. explained that individual reading was undertaken at home. In other words, opportunities for the children to read extended text were confined to books that the children took home to read to parents. This practice was in part the result of the resources available in the classroom. There was only a single copy of any title available, so that whole class or small group shared reading of extended written text was not feasible. H. S. did indicate that multiple copies of books were available in some Grade 1 classrooms, and that those children did read books to the teacher in class. The availability of reading material was consistent with the whole language philosophy that underpinned the curriculum in the school. It was believed that multiple copies of basal readers were undesirable and that children were better to engage in reading 'authentic text'.

> Interviewer: So what's your reading program like?
>
> H. S.: We have readers that go home every night. We've got 25 different books. So every kid gets a different book. We can't read them in class. They go home sight unseen. .....And the range of books is amazing – they go from five words to a chapter book, and there are some with no words at all.
>
> Interviewer: How often will they take a book home?
>
> H. S.: Most will take it home every night. (I've) Got a couple that haven't bothered bringing them (their book) back or have one all semester, and because I've said 'You bring it back or you'll pay for it.' they've brought it back. And that's it. That's all they've had.
>
> Thus, it seems that the teacher herself does not hear the children reading extended text. She reads books to them, but there are no books that the children read to her in class. Books are designated to home reading which, of course, she cannot see.

The use of home reading as a core element in the literacy program limited opportunities for H. S. to facilitate the children's emerging reading skills and her opportunities to observe their development in reading.

Reflecting a whole language approach to reading, decoding text was seen as relatively unimportant in literacy learning. The teacher encouraged the use of four main approaches to decoding text. Children were told to look at the picture, use context to assist in 'guessing' the word, look at the first letter, and finally, try to find a 'little' word in the unknown word.

H. S.: You've got to train them. Look at the picture clue. Look at the first sound, read on, miss it out, come back, guess and check. Does it fit? I've had to take good kids aside and actually teach them that. Sit down and "OK, now if I don't know a word what can I do?' And we'll do it as a class if we come across a word we don't know. Over and over and over. "Picture clues, look at the picture clues. Of course that's the first thing parents squash.

Interviewer: Yes?

H. S.: Yes, you send them home a home reader they (the parents) go ' Don't look at the picture, look at the word'. And so they sort of squash that straight away. You are saying 'No, no, tell your parents it's alright to look at the picture'. A lot of them will sound it out. I don't ever say 'sound it out'.

As a result of the way the reading program was structured, H. S. appeared to focus on talking about the process of reading in the form of hypotheticals rather than engaging children in the here-and-now activity of reading actual books. The lesson in which H. S. focussed most clearly on developing reading strategies was based on the theme of dinosaurs and clearly illustrates the detachment of teaching reading strategies from student engagement in the process of reading.

H. S. We're going to do a reading activity. We're going to work out what you do when you read a book, what are some of the things (you can do) if you come across a word that you don't know.

Andrew: Look at the picture.

H. S. That's a good one. You can look at the picture. That's a very good one. What's something else that will let us know, Warren?

Warren: Sound out.

H. S. We might look at the first sound, because it could be a blend, How else will we find out what we want to know, Colin?

Colin: When you listen to the book and you copy the words.

S. H: O. K., yeah. You're reading a book and you've come across a word you just don't know, How are you going to find it out?

Andrew: Jump it.

H. S.: Jump it. So you're going to read, ahead. Very good. Andrew again,

Andrew: Look for a little word.

S. H: That's good. Look for a little word.

O.K. You've looked at the picture, you've looked at the first letter. What else can you do. Alice

Alice: Ummmm.

H. S. You can have a...

Barbara: A guess.

H. S. Guess. You could guess. Or you could predict. Predict just mean 'what do you think it is'. OK we can read ahead, what else can we do?

John: Read on.

H. S. Read on. Yes. That means the same as read ahead. Colin?

Colin: You could sound out the words.

H. S.: How about, what's the opposite of read on?

Tom: Read back?

H. S.: Read back, that's right. We can read back and have a look and then again guess and predict.

No actual words or sentences were used in this discussion. The children had to imagine the activity of working out what a word says. The lesson then moved on to the seatwork activity which consisted of cutting out four pictures of dinosaurs and pasting each on a page to match a piece of text (e.g. Stegosaurus has a big sail on his back). The intention was that children would use the picture provided as a cue for deciphering the text. Unfortunately the activity didn't meet the teacher's aims, as it was necessary for the children to be able to decode the text first in order to match it to a picture.

Thus, it appeared that although the set curriculum and school policy constrained classroom practices, pedagogy was influenced by a diversity of factors related to the H. S.'s beliefs and preferences for particular forms of pedagogy. Her pedagogical orientation resulted in the enactment of the curriculum in particular ways. Specifically, she taught concepts that were mandated by the school-based curriculum committee, used a form of 'Socratic Dialogue' to induce concepts rather than explicitly informing children of key concepts and ideas, relied on a home reading program to provide opportunities for children to read extended text, and utilised activities and worksheets to reinforce particular concepts.

Pedagogy and Opportunities to Observe Student Learning

The classroom demonstrated a context in which the opportunities available to observe those children who were experiencing literacy problems were constrained by the intersection of a number of factors. School curriculum policy dictated the content to be covered, the complexity of some

concepts being taught and the nature of the pedagogy focussing on dialogue resulted in a series of teacher/question-student/answer sequences. These sequences provided the primary opportunity for the teacher to observe student competence. It appeared that children who were judged competent were those who could decipher teacher cues to answer questions in the way that the teacher wanted.

In the extract of the lesson on decoding strategies and dinosaurs, Andrew, Warren, Alice, Barbara, John and Colin were asked to respond to the teacher's request for ways that any text could be decoded. Andrew, Barbara, Tom and John gave answers that the teacher regarded as correct. In the lesson H. S. endorsed each of their answers. When discussing the students in her class H. S. indicated that Andrew and Barbara were exceptionally good students. She described Andrew as "One of the top group, (who is) very academic...". She admitted that Andrew was not perfect. "He's getting a bit cheeky, he likes to push his luck. He doesn't mean to be cheeky, he means to be funny. Once he knows the difference he's fine. They're so cute at that age". Along with Andrew, Barbara was described as "exceptional at everything. She finishes all her work, no matter what. Always one of the top finishing people".

John and Tom were seen as achieving satisfactorily but not quite as outstanding as Andrew and Barbara. It is interesting to note that although John's answer that you could 'read on' was not judged completely wrong, it did not received the same level of endorsement that Andrew or Barbara's answers received. H. S. indicated that John had merely restated a previously confirmed correct strategy ('That means the same as read ahead'). While Tom's answer was accepted unconditionally, he offered it tentatively, as a question. He did not present his contribution with the unequivocal confidence evidenced by the 'exceptional' students, Andrew and Barbara.

Andrew, Barbara, John and Tom contrast with Warren, Colin and Alice whose answers were all unacceptable. Alice failed to answer the question and both Warren and Colin suggested that the words could be 'sounded out'. However, this was not an acceptable answer to H. S. This is ironic because in analysing the cutting and pasting activity that formed part of the lesson, it is clear that the use of letter-sound cues to decode unknown words was the only strategy that could successfully lead to completion of the activity.

While Andrew and Barbara were regarded as excellent students and John and Tom were seen as making satisfactory progress, Warren, Colin and Alice were all described as experiencing learning disabilities and receiving support for their reading. Although two of their answers could be considered technically correct, the teacher judged them as inaccurate as they were inconsistent with her own philosophy of reading. Because of the nature of the pedagogy in the classroom, answers to teacher's questions are one of the few mechanisms that students have to demonstrate competence (or incompetence). It seems that these 'wrong' answers are part of the basis for H. S.'s decision about who has a learning difficulty. This process is not unique to H. S.'s classroom. Baker and

Freebody (1993) have described a teacher's "crediting" students differentially with literate competence in the teacher's reception of student answers to such classroom questions.

Getting the Answer Right

At times the particular answer that the teacher was seeking during these question-answer sequences was obscure, so that as observers we were unclear as to what would constitute a legitimate answer. However, some students seemed to be able to intuit the 'right' answer, while others were consistently 'wrong'. As with the discussion of reading strategies we sometimes found the teacher's judgement of answers perplexing. However, it appeared that students who gave "correct" answers were seen as capable and those who gave "incorrect" answers were seen as having learning disabilities. It needs to be remembered that for teachers enacting this kind of classroom discourse structure, at least some right or correct answers are necessary to maintain a sense that the teacher is competent (Baker, 1991). Thus, the students who get right answers even where the questioning is game-like or obscure are crucial in allowing the pedagogy to proceed. Those children who produce a capable teacher are therefore capable themselves.

Another example extends this point further. Following a lesson on dinosaurs, H. S. gave a lesson on dragons. The lesson began by looking at the cover of the book and deciding that the book was about dragons. They then talked about the characteristics of dragons and H. S. asked:

H. S.: Does it look Similar to a dinosaur?
Students (chorus): Yes. No.
H. S. How does it look like a dinosaur? What are the similarities between that and a dinosaur?
Tom: Scales.
H. S. : Hands up please. Yes, Matthew.
Matthew: Big feet.

The lesson continued discussing the similarities between dinosaurs and dragons which included, long tails, claws, sharp teeth, tails, sails, ears, and eyes. This was followed by a discussion of differences between dragons and dinosaurs.

H. S.: What's the main difference between a dragon and a dinosaur?
Colin: They have tails.
H. S.: How do we know dinosaurs are real?
Andrew: They've got fossils. Cause they, they got fossils.

H. S.: We have fossils of dinosaurs. Do we know that dragons are real?

Students (chorus): No.

S.H.: So what do we call those animals? It's a nice.

Warren: Marsupials.

Barbara: Make believe.

H. S.: Make believe, that's a good one, I like that. So they're make believe. Make believe or fantasy.

The question "what do we call those animals?" marked a critical point in the dialogue. When initially observing the lesson, we were unable to deduce the 'correct' answer when the question was asked and saw Barbara's answer 'make believe' as quite inspired. However, after viewing the video several times, reading the transcripts and reading her interviews it became clear to us that H. S. wished to contrast non-fiction text about dinosaurs with fiction about dragons. It appeared that students who were judged as exceptionally good were able to follow H. S.'s line of reasoning across a sequence of lessons and come up with answers to questions that to the naïve observer were completely opaque. Warren, who was seen as having a learning disability was unable to do this. He appears to have arrived at his answer by recalling an earlier lesson about marsupials. Barbara, in contrast, was able to reason across a number of lessons and retrieve the magic word.

As observers it often appeared to us that H. S.'s lessons lacked a logical structure. However, it seems that students who excelled in this classroom were able to impose a coherence on the lessons by showing their thinking processes to coincide with the teacher's. They were able to make sense out of scattered references and unannounced shifts of topic in ways that the other children, and we the researchers, could not. When teachers hear this being done, they hear their own competence as a questioner being validated. Whether this is literate competence or competence in reading the teacher's mind is a question that researchers have posed before. It is the obverse that we are concerned with here: that a student's inability to restore the teacher to competence becomes a sign that the child is deficient.

Seatwork as Demonstration of Competence

The second opportunity for H. S. to observe students occurred when students were engaged in a seatwork activity. These activities consisted of completing a prepared worksheet and often involved cutting and pasting pictures or copying small pieces of text. H. S. 's interview comments indicate that these activities provided her with information she used to make judgements about which students were experiencing learning disabilities. Those students who were efficient at completing their work and showed manual dexterity in completing the task were regarded as competent. Those

who were slow to finish, did not attend to the task or very clumsy in the execution of the activity were seen as demonstrating learning disabilities. At no time did she mention children's competence in understanding or producing written text as mechanisms for recognition of learning disabilities. In fact, she indicated that she suspected that some of the children identified as having learning disabilities probably do understand the material ('Do you understand what you need to do?' 'No.' but they probably do'), but they choose to perform poorly by being inattentive or using up time until the lesson is completed.

Interviewer: How do you come to notice that students are having learning disabilities?

H. S.: They won't be finishing their work. Their writing will be really messy. "Can you see these lines? There are lines on this page, you've avoided all of them." Sometimes they have trouble even articulating what they want or something like that and you notice that. They often always the last to finish. They will have to go to the toilet. "I have to go to the toilet." "Can I go to the toilet?" Very good avoidance tactics.

Interviewer: Yes.

S.H.: Yes. "I can't find something". I'm swinging off my chair. I'm talking to someone. Anything to avoid that task, and that's when I'll bring them over and say to them "OK what is your problem? Can't you do this? Do you understand what you need to do?" "No." but they probably do, but they know that there are certain time limits here and they just might go over the time here and it'll have to stop. They forget they'll have to do it some other time. Last few weeks of school it's been in their lunchtime. ....they are given a paper and pencil and they lose their place and they have to get it done. That works for some of them but then they are so good at avoidance they don't even do it then. "I did some." And they might have written two things and you are thinking half an hour, And then you think "Yeah, that's right. That's about what you do in my class.

...There is a whole lot of things you look for and you think "That's a sign". Pencil grip is a sign. Brain gym is really good. If they can't cross over, you know how you've got to touch your left leg with your right hand, if they're having troubles with that, you know. You know someone's got a problem. It's always the ones with learning disabilities that can't do it. I do it every day for 10 – 15 minutes, and as soon as they get it, they start understanding a few things as well....

Interviewer: ...They can't touch their right foot with their left hand?

H. S. Yes, they can't cross over. In Year 1 they're funny. Because they'll write some of their sentences and their pencil will stop somewhere and they'll grab it with the

> other hand. They won't cross over that line. ... And that's when you think "oh, they've got big problems here, they haven't decided what hand they're going to use."...
>
> They are still having problems with fine motor skills. A major one. Gross motor can be part of it. They are usually not very good at phys ed. either.

Although the views articulated by H. S. on the relationship between motor skills and learning disabilities indicates a traditionally popular perspective on the causes of learning problems, it is not supported by empirical research (Shepard, Smith & Vojir, 1983; Ysseldyke, Algozzine, & Epps, 1983). Yet it provides a comfortable theoretical basis to account for her decisions about students. H. S. seems to locate signs of understanding or lack of understanding in the body, through a glance being able to find children who do not look or move or act like readers (Baker and Luke, 1991).

Another pertinent point about H. S.'s activities of noticing is that she very rarely makes eye contact with students, in either part of the lesson, and she seems to have little sustained interaction with any of the students. In viewing the videotapes we have tried to work out what student activities are in her line of vision such that she could have any idea about how children are doing academically. We have located right and wrong answers that are in her line of hearing, and "pencil grip" and other physical signs in reported in the interview data. These lines of hearing and vision correspond exactly to the activities that make up her lessons. In this respect we see enactment of a pedagogy as the filter through which observing and noticing can be done.

It is conceded that this classroom represents a single idiosyncratic approach to teaching literacy. It is one demonstration of the relations between enactment of curriculum, conditions or opportunities for teacher observation, and decisions on who has learning difficulties (domains A, B and C on our map). Both school policy and the teacher's classroom practices were underpinned by a whole language approach to literacy with attention to genre theory. This philosophical approach intersected with a set of pedagogical practices that defined the space in which the teacher could make observation about the competence or incompetence of students. As naïve observers we found that the classroom did not reveal information about children's competence to read and comprehend text. Rather it distinguished between those students who were capable of using a range of covert cues to follow the teacher's reasoning in order to answer questions to her satisfaction and those who could not. It also distinguished between children who were conscientious and diligent and who were neat and tidy in their execution of motor tasks and those who were not. In this way it appeared to us that the pedagogy played a central role in defining who was clever and who was learning disabled in the class.

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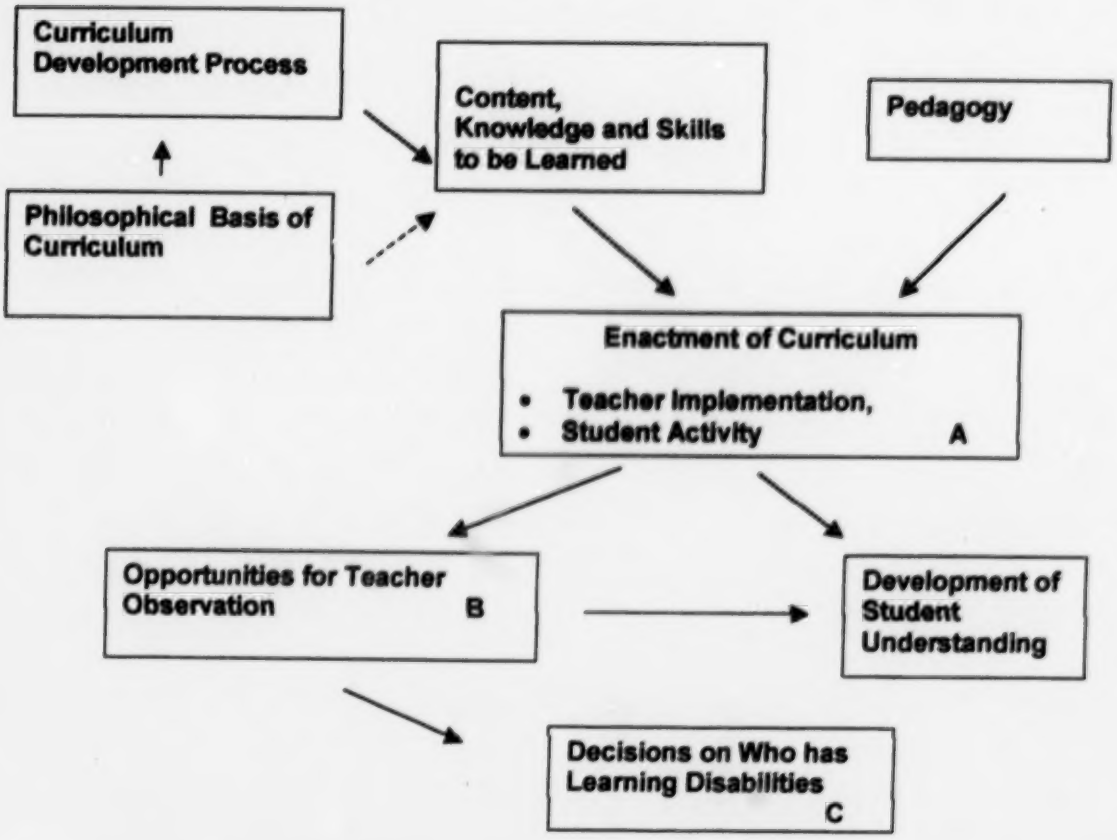

Figure 1. Overview of Factors Impacting on Classroom Practices